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ABSTRACT

This speech presents the results of a study that examined whether a phenomenon previously observed in nonpartisan school board elections is also true of partisan school board elections. Previous studies had shown that school board incumbent defeat in nonpartisan elections is related to involuntary superintendent turnover. The study investigated that relationship in partisan elections. One hundred and eighty-one Pennsylvania districts where board members are elected as Republicans or as Democrats were studied and data were subjected to chi-square analysis. Five hypotheses were tested to determine if the partisan phenomenon changed this relationship. Based on these data, partisanship did not change this political process in the politics of local school districts. (Author/JF)

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SCHOOL BOARD INCUMBENT DEFEAT IN PARTISON ELECTIONS*

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Introduction

One need no longer begin a paper on the politics of education by pointing out that education is a political process. That point now seems clearly established, but the nature of that political activity still remains unclearly defined. The present paper attempts to adjust that focus somewhat. While investigating local school politics, the actual purpose of this investigation was to determine how partisan politics affects the nature of educational politics usually played in non-partisan arenas. This research investigated a well-established phenomenon in the non-partisan politics of education as it operated in Pennsylvania, a state electing school board members within the normal partisan political process at regular primary and general elections by casting votes for Democrat, Republican or independent candidates.

Theoretical Background

It is hardly a startling revelation that local school boards exercise considerable power in educational decision-making. But the process of this exercise of power has generally been held to be non-political. A year long participant observer study¹ of a school board showed this process to

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generally non-partisan but far from non-political. Three variables emerged as extremely interesting in this case: 1) incumbent school board defeat, 2) superintendent-board conflict, 3) involuntary superintendent turn-over. About this same time Callahan² noted the relationship between the power of the board, the vulnerability of the superintendent and superintendent turn-over. Four years later another study³ confirmed the relationship between incumbent defeat and involuntary superintendent turn-over at the .001 confidence level. The field study conducted in the Mid West and the validation study done on the West Coast that confirmed the field data, both investigated school boards elected on a non-partisan bases. The theoretical nature of that process and the expanded case study are reported in Politics, Power and Policy: The Study of a Local School Board.⁴ Iannacconi and Lutz felt the process they described so compelling that they entitled the incumbent defeat-superintendent turn-over chapter "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsen,"⁵ vaguely interpreted, "It is too late--you have been found deficient--your reign is over! In other words, incumbent school board defeat is the handwriting on the wall, usually seen to late. It signals that the operation of the schools has been found wanting by the public and the superintendent is very likely to be relieved of his duties. While the correlation is not 1.0, the relationships is certainly compelling.

Based upon their findings, Iannacconi and Lutz speculated that the non-partisan nature of school politics might contribute to the long delay between social change and educational policy reform and thus to the relationship between incumbent defeat and superintendent turn-over. The question of whether placing education clearly within the partisan political

arena might improve its responsiveness to society's demands can be given a conditional and theoretical yes. If so, then one would expect to find some difference in the incumbent defeat and superintendent turn-over relationship in states electing school board members on a partisan basis. This study investigated that possibility.⁶

It was hypothesized that the partisan nature of school board elections in Pennsylvania would change the relationship in several ways. For instance, if one's entire party is swept out resulting in an incumbent school board member's defeat, one could hardly reason that the entire ticket, including state candidates lost because of dissatisfaction with local school policy. Thus this situation should not be related to superintendent turn-over.

This type of reasoning resulted in the following hypotheses:

H 1. In partisan, general elections in Pennsylvania, more school board candidates win when their party wins than when their party loses.

H 2. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in Pennsylvania's partisan general election is not necessarily reflective of community dissatisfaction with the school board and its policy to the degree that involuntary turn-over results:

H 2 a. The defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member, accompanied by the defeat of the rest of the incumbent's party, will not signal involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

H 2 b. The defeat of an incumbent school board member in a primary election will signal involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

H 2 c. The defeat of a renominated incumbent school board member in the partison general election accompanied by a victory of the rest of the incumbent's party will be the strongest indicator of involuntary superintendent turn-over within three years.

Support for hypothesis one would lend greater support to the speculation that hypotheses two might be correct. Hypothesis two if confirmed would be explained in some detail if hypotheses 2a, 2b and 2c were confirmed, describing how partison politics might effect school board member incumbent defeat. We speculated that partison politicians (particulary at the bottom of the ticket) lose or win because their part wins or loses. Therefore, in a partison election a school board member's defeat would not be related to voter dissatisfaction with local school policy and would not likely result in the dismissal (either overtly or covertly) of the superintendent. The exception would be when an incumbent is defeated in a primary or even more likely when he is nominated in the primary, his party wins in the general election, but he is personally defeated by a member of the losing party.

Research Procedures

The sample of school districts to test the above hypotheses was selected from the nine-man school board districts in Pennsylvania. All candidates for these boards had to be nominated in their party's primary election. Elections are held during odd years and each board is elected for a six year term in a general election. As a result, board members serve overlapping terms and it would take at least six years to replace an entire board. Useable data were available from 192 districts to test hypothesis

1.0 and from 165 districts to test hypotheses 2.0, 2a, 2b, and 2c. School districts were randomly selected from those districts meeting the election criteria required and the final samples were generally representative of the state as a whole with regard to size catagories, urban-rural, and geographical distribution.

All districts selected were administered by a superintendent of schools. Districts administered by supervising principals and responsible to county superintendents were eliminated from the study. Each of the superintendents were operating within a four year term that began July 1, 1966 and expired July 1, 1970, or were filling unexpired terms of superintendents retired, voluntarily moved to other positions or victims of involuntary superintendent turnover. Therefore, any superintendent replaced during this four year period was of interest to this study. As we intended to test hypotheses related to superintendent turnover following the three year period of incumbent defeat, the general elections of November 7, 1967 were examined for the necessary election data. Superintendent involuntary turnover occurring between December 4, 1967 (as the board elected in the November 7 election was constituted officially on December 4, 1967), and December 4, 1970 provided the involuntary turnover data. This period included July 1, 1970, the date on which all superintendents in Pennsylvania re-employed for the following four year period officially signed their new contracts.

In order to test hypothesis one, data concerning party victory were needed. Party victory was operationally defined as a Party having won more than one-half of all the offices appearing on the ballot. These and other election data were collected from local newspaper accounts. Where such data were impossible to obtain from newspaper accounts, the specific

school district was called to obtain the information.

Data regarding the general nature of superintendent turnover was collected at the Pennsylvania State Department of Education. Data related to the specific nature of turnover (voluntary or involuntary) were collected through questionnaires sent to the superintendents who succeeded in the office. Where questionnaires were not returned, phone calls were placed to obtain the information. The specific questionnaire is available in the original dissertation.⁸

All data were analyzed with 2x2 chi square contingency tables using the Yates correction. A chi square within .05 or less confidence level was required in order to reject the null version of all hypotheses.

Data Analyses

In order to discover how partisanship might effect educational politics, we decided to test the school board incumbent defeat--involuntary superintendent turnover theory (developed in non-partisan political environments) in Pennsylvania school districts where board members are elected in partisan elections. The following is the analysis of null hypotheses related to that theory.

H 1. There is no difference in the number of school board candidates elected when their party wins as compared with candidates elected whose party loses .

TABLE I
Candidate Winning-Losing Related to Party Victory

		candidate	
		wins	loses
party	wins	775	132 (907)
	loses	132	775 (907)

(907) $\chi^2 = 10,827$ significant at the .001 level. (907) N - 1814

H 2. In general partisan elections of school board members, incumbent defeat will have no relationship to involuntary superintendent turnover.

TABLE II
General Election Incumbent Defeat and
Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover	
		yes	no
Incumbent Defeat	yes	10	24 (34)
	no	7 (17)	61 (68) (85) N = 102*

$$\chi^2 = 4.64 \text{ significant at the .05 level}$$

It should be noted, however, that when districts where incumbents lost in primary elections were included as non-incumbent losing districts there was no significance. This phenomenon will be discussed later.

H 2 a. School board incumbent defeat accompanied by party defeat will not be followed by involuntary superintendent turnover.
(The null hypotheses could not be rejected and thus hypotheses seems to be supported.)

H 2 b. There is no relationship between primary election defeat of an incumbent school board member and involuntary superintendent turnovers.

TABLE III
Primary Election Incumbent Defeat and
Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover	
		yes	no
Incumbent Defeat	yes	19	40 (59)
	no	17 (36)	87 (104) (127) N = 163

$$\chi^2 = 4.77 \text{ significant at the .05 level}$$

*Excluding districts where incumbent defeat occurred in the primary.

H 2 c. There is no relationship between involuntary turnover and the defeat of an incumbent school board member while the incumbents party wins the election. (The null hypotheses could not be rejected) Actually this was theoretically predicted as the strongest relationship. Failure to obtain any significance will be discussed later.

H 2 d. An additional hypotheses was formulated after data collection began. This omitted reference to the partisan nature of the election and catagories of incumbent defeat (e.g., party losing or wining; loss in general or primary election) stating simply that incumbent defeat, regardless of category will be related to involuntary turnover. The following data tested that notion.

TABLE IV
Incumbent Defeat (All Catagories)
And Involuntary Superintendent Turnover

		Involuntary Turnover		
		yes	no	
Incumbent Defeat	yes	29	64	(93)
	no	7	61	(68)
		(36)	(125)	N = 161

$\chi^2 = 9.60$ significant at the .01

Discussion and Implications

There is clearly some relationship between partisanship and school board member elections. This relationship was demonstrated at the .001 level when it was shown that there is a strong relationship between a school board member's victory and the victory of his party. In Pennsylvania's partisan elections in areas where the Democratic party is strong, (more than one

half of the candidates on their ticket wins election), Democrats tend to win the school board seats and visa versa. This phenomenon supports Bonfield and Wilson's notion about the nature of partisan vs nonpartisan elections in general. But here the influence of partisanship seems to end.

Hypothesis two demonstrated that the relationship between school board member incumbent defeat in general partisan elections and involuntary turnover, demonstrated earlier in non-partisan school elections also exists in partisan elections in Pennsylvania.

Given that there is a close relationship in partisan elections of the school board member's election and his party's victory (demonstrated in Hypotheses one) then one would expect that the reverse would be true. If the party loses, thus causing an incumbent to lose, than involuntary superintendent turnover would not be related to that event. We reason that in nonpartisan districts incumbent defeat generally results from public dissatisfaction with the school policy set by the incumbent board. But in partisan elections incumbent defeat in the lower part of the ticket (school board members for example) follows dissatisfaction with larger party policy and thus should not affect superintendent turnover. This appears to be so as demonstrated in hypotheses 2a.

Some other things should then follow. Defeat of an incumbent in the primary elections should be more powerfully related to involuntary superintendent turnover than the general incumbent defeat category. In other words, if in general elections an incumbent loses simply because his party loses, this should have no affect on superintendent involuntary turnover as demonstrated in hypotheses 2a. But an incumbent's loss during a primary reflects on his own operation while in office and has nothing to do with

whether or not his party wins the general election. Thus one would expect greater significance to appear in hypotheses 2a than in 2b. While the null hypotheses in 2b was rejected, the confidence level was not as great as that in hypotheses 2d. Incumbent defeat during a primary was not more strongly related to superintendent, involuntary turnover than the general catagory of incumbent defeat. The expected affect of partisonism was not demonstrated.

Following the same line of reasoning, we predicted that if an incumbent won his primary and his party won the general election, and if he personally was defeated in the general election, thus should mean considerable local disfavor with his operation in office and therefore be very strongly related to involuntary superintendent turnover. Hypotheses 2c tested this notion. Again the null hypotheses was rejected but with less confidence than hypotheses 2d. In other words, the partison effect was weaker than simple incumbent defeat related to involuntary turnover.

Of considerable interest then is the auxillary finding tested in hypotheses 2d. The general catagory incumbent defeat (without partison subclassification) had strongest relationship to involuntary superintendent turnover. When only districts experiencing superintendent turnover were analyzed, the relationship between incumbent defeat and involuntary turnover increased to a significant level of .001, matching that found in the original nonpartison elections. Thus this relationship was the same and was apparently unaffected by the partison nature of school board elections in Pennsylvania.

Discussion

For some time the senior author of this paper has contended that placing the politics of education squarely in the partison political

arena would make politicians and their parties more accountable for educational outcomes and, therefore, more responsive to educational demands. It was argued that if the party was responsible for formulating an education plank and then for keeping its promises at national, state and local levels, education would be forced into the position of political attention and consideration it deserves. Politicians could no longer duck responsibility for education if they as Republicans or Democrats were responsible for the development of educational policy.

Apparently this is not so. The data gathered in this study indicate that partisanship will affect the number of Democrats or Republicans elected to a school board in any particular area. But once elected, education again becomes a non-partisan activity. There is little political coverage in education as pointed out by Masters.¹⁰ Evidently no party wants to take the credit or blame for ousting a local superintendent. For that matter, the same appears true at the national level where we see bi-partisan support for antibussing legislation. If there is a partisan nature in the politics of education, it is much more subtle than that. Perhaps in such things as appointments to the Supreme Court or Committee chairmanships but not in the support or lack of it in avert political education bills that seem to have some ground swell support at the grass roots level. Politicians steer clear of partisanship in educational matters. And we let them get away with it!

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